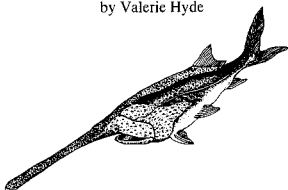


THE PADDLEFISH

by Valerie Hyde



Common names: paddlefish
spoonbill catfish

DESCRIPTION

Paddlefish are characterized by a long, canoe paddle-like snout that extends out up to one-third the length of their body. They are blue-gray along their backs and white below. These large fish have smooth skin and a torpedo-shaped body that is propelled by a shark-like tail fin.

SIZE

Paddlefish over 5 feet in length and weighing more than 60 pounds are common. One, caught in Iowa, weighed a record 198 pounds. These amazing fish can live to be 30 years old.

MOBILITY

Paddlefish are very mobile. A specimen tagged in the Wisconsin River, below the Prairie du Sac dam, was sighted in the Mississippi River near Alma, Wisconsin. That's a journey of over 200 river miles!



CHARACTERISTICS

The skeletal system of paddlefish is composed primarily of cartilage. The jaws of adults have some bony material but do not contain teeth.

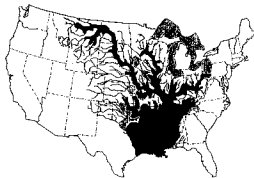
American paddlefish, *Polyodon spathula*, are filter feeders. Comb-like structures, called gill rakers, are used to filter zooplankton (microscopic animals) from the water.

The only other member of the paddlefish family, *Psephurus gladius*, (found in the Yangtze River of China), feeds on other fish and has a cone-shaped snout.

REPRODUCTION

In the Midwest, male paddlefish reach sexual maturity in 7 to 9 years, females in 10 to 12 years. Mature males spawn every year. Mature females spawn only every 2 or 3 years and will absorb their eggs if conditions are unfavorable.

Spring spawning runs are triggered by a precise combination of photoperiod (day length), water in the mid 50° F range, and an increased rate of flow. During spawning runs, paddlefish seek flooded gravel bars. Fertilized eggs adhere to the gravel. Fast-moving water provides oxygen and prevents silt from suffocating the developing eggs.



DISTRIBUTION OF PADDLEFISH

Gray —  Historical range
Solid —  Present range

RANGE

Two thirds of America's landmass is drained by the Mississippi and Missouri rivers. Paddlefish are adapted to the backwater, pool, side channel, oxbow and bayou habitats of these large rivers and their tributaries.

STATUS

At the turn of the century, the range of paddlefish extended from the Gulf of Mexico up into the Great Lakes and from Montana to Maryland. Today, paddlefish are doing well in the Tennessee, Cumberland and Arkansas rivers. Populations in the Mississippi, Missouri, Ohio and Red rivers have declined, and paddlefish have completely disappeared from four states and the Great Lakes.

PROBLEMS

Declines in the number and range of paddlefish have been caused by over-harvest, water pollution, sedimentation of gravel bars needed for spawning, and the construction of dams which alter natural water levels and block migration and access to spawning grounds.



PROTECTION

The range of paddlefish has been shrinking and their numbers declining. In response to this, Minnesota and Wisconsin protect this fish from all forms of harvest. It is illegal to snag or possess paddlefish in these states.

WITH A LITTLE HELP

Anglers should immediately release fish that are accidentally hooked to avoid exhausting them beyond their ability to recover.

One of the largest paddlefish populations in Wisconsin is located below the Prairie du Sac dam, on the Wisconsin River. Injuries attributed to boat propellers were found on 13% of the fish sampled there. Boaters can reduce the number of injuries by driving slowly where paddlefish are known to congregate.

FUTURE

These unique fish are a living endowment to the biological resources of American river systems. The rich genetic diversity of wild paddlefish stocks spans a long, long time. People lucky enough to sight this magnificent fish leaping out of the water glimpse a moment of eternity. With a little help, this American treasure can continue to inhabit our rivers.

PERIOD OF ORIGIN

Hadean earth is formed
4500 million years ago



Devonian paddlefish
appear 300-400 million
years ago



Triassic dinosaurs
appear 250 million
years ago



Pleistocene early humans
3 million years ago



HISTORY

Paddlefish were gliding through American rivers long before this land was inhabited by humans. Fossil records date their first appearance to be between 300 and 400 million years ago...about 50 million years before the first dinosaurs appeared on earth.

MANAGEMENT

The key to successful management of paddlefish is to understand their biological requirements and how those needs interact with other water users.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Biological Service are conducting telemetry studies, using radio transmitters, to learn about the movement and habitat use of individual paddlefish.

The Mississippi Interstate Cooperative Resource Association (MICRA) is gathering information on paddlefish distribution and exploitation in 22 states, including Minnesota and Wisconsin.

Cooperation between management agencies and the public is necessary, as paddlefish are very mobile and move across state, tribal and private boundaries.



PADDLEFISH

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Artwork by Barbara Hamer



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